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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study that explored superintendent and school-board evaluations. Specifically, it looked at some of the methods and uses of boards' evaluations of superintendents and some of the needs and methods of boards' evaluation of themselves. Data for the study were collected from 188 surveys of selected school superintendents in Indiana, Illinois, and Texas. Following are some of the findings on superintendent evaluation: A total of 83.5 percent of the superintendents said they had a formal written evaluation by their school boards. In addition to those, 13 percent of the superintendents said that their boards evaluated them in writing. A total of 77.5 percent stated that the evaluation was done annually. Texas used the self-evaluation for a majority of its superintendents (74.6 percent), while 28.2 percent in Indiana and 36.2 percent in Illinois used such an instrument as part of the evaluation process. Following are some of the findings on board self-evaluation: Overall, 13.8 percent of the superintendents stated that their board evaluated itself formally every year. Only 22.9 percent of the boards asked the superintendent to assist in this evaluation process, and 18.6 percent used an outside consultant. (WFA)

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Superintendent and School Board Evaluation: A Three-State Study

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Superintendent and School Board Evaluation: A Three-State Study

INTRODUCTION

There are many embedded issues in superintendent/school board relations, and most people who are knowledgeable on the subject place role clarification as being among the most crucial. For example, in the process of selecting a superintendent, a clear understanding of which party has which responsibilities is of the utmost importance for the superintendent and board to get off to a good start. In a perfect world and with a clear understanding of roles, the board will provide the superintendent with its expectations for him/her as its new superintendent. However, this is not necessarily the case because there are many areas of responsibility that are not clear at all. One such area of ambiguity is that of the superintendent's evaluation, and perhaps even more ambiguous is the evaluation of the board.

In evaluating the superintendent, the board is faced with critical questions. How will the superintendent be evaluated? How does the superintendent want to be evaluated? What is the purpose of the evaluation in the first place? Who will be involved in the evaluation and how will the evaluation be conducted? These are serious questions that many boards seem ill equipped to handle. John Carver (March, 2000) refers to a corporate model called Policy Governance which is espoused in many states as the way a superintendent and school board should operate. The board makes policy and the superintendent administers the policy, but how should a board of education evaluate the superintendent's performance in administering policy?

Critical questions also arise with the evaluation of the board. How should the board evaluate its own performance? Does the board evaluate itself even if there is no mandate to do so? What should be the purpose of a board evaluating itself and what role does the superintendent play in evaluating the board. These are difficult questions to answer; henceforth, it is often the case that they are not dealt with at all. The purpose of this study was to explore the subject of superintendent and school board evaluation and its linkage to external concepts that are often held by the public as requirements. In reality, the board may not feel it is necessary to evaluate the superintendent or itself.

PURPOSE OF EVALUATION

Evaluation has two primary purposes: evaluation for accountability and evaluation for improvement. In other words, is the purpose of the evaluation to collect information to help the superintendent improve or to determine reasons for dismissal? Effective boards do both. Boards may conduct evaluation activities for two reasons: to provide feedback to the superintendent for improvement of his/her job performance, and to provide guidance for the school district in evaluations for making career personnel decisions.

Should the superintendent's evaluation be tied to goals the board has established? Absolutely, such goals provide the superintendent a sense of direction and serve as an example of the board exercising its over-site duties for the school district. Many superintendents decry the amount of energy it takes to enable the board to conduct evaluations of any type. But, in either evaluation, the superintendent should be expected to provide progress reports to the board on a regular basis. These progress reports should be reviewed by the board and feedback should be provided to the superintendent. If there is a disagreement as to the progress report, a timely change that would reconcile the differences can be made more easily. This is much better than waiting until the end of the year and having the evaluation influenced unduly by events that occurred within the last month. It is quite possible that the superintendent did not know of the difference of opinion and continues to perform his/her job the same way not knowing some of the board wanted it done differently.

The superintendent's progress reports require monitoring on the part of the board, but the payoff they provide are frequent updates as to what the superintendent is doing, and thus the board has a better knowledge of what is going on in the school district. The superintendent should frame his/her progress reports in reference to the goals that were established. This should provide the board with a sense of accomplishment that the goals are being worked on in an organized way. If the board disagrees with the actions that the superintendent is taking, it is much better to have mid-course corrections rather than wait until the differences have escalated to a point of nonsupport. Usually a board meets on a regular basis once or twice a month. The superintendent's progress reports could become a standing agenda item for one of the board meetings, say once a month. In this manner, the

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superintendent has the opportunity to educate and reeducate the board as to the progress the district is making. The board will be better informed and fewer unwanted surprises will occur.

THE MECHANICS OF SUPERINTENDENT EVALUATION

Legally speaking, the board must operate within an evaluation timeline or face the possibility of keeping a superintendent beyond a specified date. A timeline is essential also for the board to provide feedback to the superintendent in a manner so that improvement will not be restricted by lack of time to accomplish the board's desires. The timing factor will be guided also by the provisions of the superintendent's contract. If there are divisions within the board as to an evaluation of the superintendent's performance, working out differences could be a time consuming process. Written clarification as to what the differences are along with suggested resolutions will help the superintendent and the board come to an understanding of what each side wants to happen. But, Castallo cautioned board members to have accurate information if they want it included in a written evaluation (August, 1999). Written information rarely gets changed and once an idea or opinion is written down, unfortunately its meaning may be open to different interpretations.

Castallo (1999) recommended that boards develop rubrics for superintendent evaluation. Drawing upon many of the models of teacher evaluation, a board may use the rubric approach to indicate to the superintendent its opinion of how he/she has progressed or not progressed toward a specific goal. If such an approach is used, it is critical that an analytic rubric be used in order for the superintendent to have information that he/she can use to guide their future actions. For example, a common rubric approach might include words like outstanding, acceptable, or needs improvement. Further clarification would be needed with descriptors in order for the evaluation to have meaning enough for a superintendent to change his/her behavior. And, critical to the process is that the board be familiar with the criteria that are included in the rubric.

A much less complicated approach is used more often. Forms or checklists are filled out by individual board members and the board chair summarizes the data and discusses it with the superintendent. A few goals are agreed upon and this happens once a

year. The superintendent's evaluation is complete, but what does the superintendent have to work for in the upcoming year? Has the board provided the superintendent with direction he/she can follow to lead and help the district to improve?

As mentioned earlier, evaluation is not an item where board members have a lot of expertise. Mathews (2001) noted this and added that board members may have a model in their minds that they do not want to mark the superintendent so high that he/she will not have room for improvement, yet such marks can be interpreted in different ways. In the mind of a well-intentioned board member, a specific mark may mean outstanding performance, but in the minds of others, it constitutes a mark of less than excellent. Such is the fallacy of rating scales or checklists. An alternative is to conduct an evaluation that includes input from a variety of stakeholders. So-called 360 degree evaluation involves a much more detailed process in many cases involving students, parents and community members. Detailed evaluation reports are becoming more objective and more data driven as school boards respond to the different language of school reform. But, do the stakeholders who might be part of the 360 degree evaluation have sufficient knowledge to provide accurate assessment of the superintendent's performance. Walter says "No! ...to evaluate a school district superintendent in this manner is disgraceful and wrong. The position a superintendent is hired to fill requires decision-making. All decisions, by their very nature cause disagreement between people" (Walter, 1998, as cited in Cleveland, Petersen, Sharp & Walter, 2000, p. 9).

Superintendent evaluations are being tied more and more to student achievement and student learning. Superintendent preparation programs contain a more intense focus on the language of school improvement and change. Martin Handley (cited in Mathews, 2001) provided a different view regarding superintendent evaluations. While working with other superintendents in Massachusetts, he found that the type of evaluation mattered very little. A superintendent could get a satisfactory or good evaluation, yet not be rehired; on the other hand some superintendents who had no evaluation at all or ones who received marks indicating 'needs improvement' might still have a great relationship with the school board.

There is a growing trend to link superintendent evaluation with student achievement. In Illinois, superintendent compensation is tied to gains in student achievement; however, in other parts of the country school boards seem reluctant to

evaluate their superintendents in this manner. In some states, student achievement ranks far down the list of criteria that are used in evaluating superintendents. In most states, school boards have been charged with responsibility for the instructional program of their schools by law, but quite often school board members feel ill equipped to deal with issues related to student achievement. The feelings of discomfort that board members have toward the instructional program are real. Most board members are not trained as teachers and thus feel their duty has been discharged when they delegate that responsibility to the superintendent and the administrative/teaching staff.

The board's role in the instructional program is not well understood by the professional educators they hire and often times board members are perceived as meddling in an area outside their assigned role. What should happen here as far as evaluation is concerned is that the board should ask the superintendent to review instructional program results and "...set achievement goals for the district based on local, state, and national assessments" (Castallo, 2000, p.51). Where the board goes from here is tedious. The superintendent should be charged with establishing a plan for reaching the goals the board has established and any communications concerning the instruction program should be done through the superintendent.

EVALUATIVE CRITERIA FOR THE SUPERINTENDENT

The issue of superintendent evaluation is a big concern between superintendents and school boards. The superintendent ordinarily has the reasonable expectation that the board will convey to him/her how well they are doing as far as job performance is concerned. The common practice however, is that most districts rely on formats that are primarily checklists or open-ended items and the information collected with such instruments is very limited. The data that are collected provide very little direction for the superintendent to use in improvement. Open-ended questions provide information that allows the board to tell the superintendent how he/she is doing in an *ad hoc* way, but such information gleaned from these questions can digress into trivial and personal agendas (Castallo, 1999).

A board of education would do well to take the time to come to a common agreement as to what criteria should be used in evaluating the superintendent, not only an

agreement on which criteria, but a clear understanding of what the criteria mean and why the criteria were chosen as part of the evaluation. Gardner listed six key areas of duty that the superintendent must assume. These might serve as a starting point for developing criteria for the evaluation: 1) Thinking long term, 2) Awareness of the outside, 3) Managerial excellence, 4) Emphasis on intangibles, 5) Political and communication skills, and 6) Thinking in terms of renewal (Gardner, 1988). While Gardner's list of duties seems transparent, within a five or seven member board that might not be the case. The collection of data to substantiate performance in these six areas could become a daunting task, although few would argue as to the importance of the six as part of the superintendent's job.

Cuban (1988) reviewed fifty years of research on the subject of superintendent performance and concluded that the superintendent must accomplish four primary things: 1) provide a vision of what the school district can become; define the mission, and set goals, 2) motivate district employees' energies toward achieving the districts' goals, 3) link the district mission to routines and behaviors, and 4) promote those values that give the district a distinctive character. Cuban went on to indicate that the behavior of the superintendent influences and shapes the behavior of subordinates. Most school administrators know the penalties associated with irritating top management.

In 1993, the AASA established a commission that developed a set of eight professional standards with corresponding competencies for superintendent evaluation. These included: 1)Leadership and District Culture, 2)Policy and Governance, 3)Communication and Community Relations, 3) Staff-person Management, 4) Business and Fiscal Management, 5) Facilities Management, 6) Curriculum and Instructional Management, 7) Management of Student Services, and 8) Comprehensive Planning. Six or seven performance criteria were listed under each of these (AASA, 1993). Again, these are good starting points, but the degree to which they can be assessed and the priority placed on them by the board could greatly influence the superintendent's evaluation.

In an Indiana survey, superintendents ranked budget development and implementation, board/superintendent relations, leadership and knowledge, and general effectiveness as the five most important areas of skill for evaluating a superintendent (Malone, 1999). Ninety-three percent and 91% respectively of those responding viewed

board/superintendent relations and budget development and implementation as most important. Now, how does a board of education go about evaluating a superintendent on these critical issues? A checklist might simply reveal that the superintendent does an adequate job of maintaining positive relations with the board, but how does this help the superintendent to improve in that area. Whatever the final criteria that are selected, the board needs to spend the necessary time to come to a common understanding of what each criterion means and the purpose it serves in the overall evaluation. This could prove to be a difficult task since most board members are not in the evaluation business and might not feel comfortable in conducting such a task. If the intention is to collect information to provide the superintendent with direction for improvement, the evaluation would be handled one way. If, on the other hand, the evaluation is conducted to document for the purpose of dismissal, the evaluation may be handled quite differently. The board's priorities for those factors that are included in the evaluation may give direction to the superintendent, but may be counterproductive to what the superintendent thinks needs to be done.

Obviously, evaluating the superintendent is an important task. In most cases, where the superintendent is successful, the district is perceived as successful and the board has discharged its elected duty well. The issue of superintendent improvement remains an integral part of the evaluation. Should the board conduct its evaluation in whatever way it chooses and simply tell the superintendent the results citing areas where he/she is doing well and areas where improvement is needed? In most evaluation systems this is an integral part, but for some reason, many board members feel ill-equipped to tell the superintendent where problems exist and what they think should be done to correct them.

"The superintendent is the chief executive officer of the school district. A proper evaluation of the superintendent is crucial to the advancement of the educational program, the relationship between the board and the superintendent, the fairness with which a board deals with its superintendent, and to the perception that school staff and the community have of the board" (Sharp, 1989, p. 27).

BOARD EVALUATION

Since the school board is an elected body in most cases, some members would argue that the board is evaluated through the ballot box. "An old maxim points out that school board members receive regular evaluations in the voting booth each election. True enough. Between elections, however, board members might devote too little energy to self-examination" (Heck, 1982, p.39). Herman (1987) says, "Self-evaluation is good for the soul – to say nothing of what it can do for your board's performance" (p. 38). Most would agree this is a type of evaluation; however, for the board to discharge its duty in the most preferable way, periodic checks and course corrections may be in order. How does a board go about evaluating itself? When goals are established with the superintendent, concurrent actions by the board should be a part. "A formal evaluation procedure, established by the board itself, can provide the board with a way of measuring and observing it own established goals and objectives. Such a process will help school boards help themselves" (Kowalski, 1981, p. 21). Such actions help in establishing a timeline and specified role to be played in the evaluation. The mere setting aside of time to focus on its role in areas such as the instructional program, the approval of financial actions, facilities appraisal and management, school and community relations, employee recognition programs, and planning for the future are areas where the board should have firm intentions as to actions it will take. In clarifying its own role in these areas the board will automatically perceive the role of the superintendent and its other employees and thus have a start on internal communications. Again, the same principles that are used to guide the superintendent's evaluation may be used in the board's self evaluation. The assessment of progress toward its own goals might need the expertise of an outside person who can look at the goals, gather data and make an assessment as to progress.

The Key Work of School Boards is a critical document for school board members (Glass, 2000). The eight areas: Vision, Standards, Assessment, Accountability, Alignment, Learning environment, Collaborative partnerships, and Continuous improvement, can serve as a framework for the board evaluation; however, objective evaluation of a board's actions cannot be done by the board itself. The employment of an external consultant who has expertise in school board action and evaluation will be a sound expenditure. When board members engage in self evaluation, the most common criteria that are used are role

clarification, communication skills, making informed decisions, undergoing continuous improvement, and maintaining good working relationships. When boards look at themselves as a whole, the criteria change to holding effective board meetings, using fiscal resources to achieve quality, setting long and short-range goals for the district, maintaining a constructive relationship with the superintendent, being fiscally accountable, developing sound policies, maintaining good relations with the community, avoiding micromanagement, and developing and maintaining sound personnel policies (Glass, 2000).

While no one would argue that the criteria for personal board member self evaluation or the reflection on the board as a whole are good, the basic perception of self evaluation is that it is not objective. A key ingredient in evaluation is that it must be perceived as objective if it is to be credible. An external consultant would bring expertise to the board evaluation that would include information from various stakeholders and the information that is collected would be matched to the agreed-upon objectives of the evaluation. Many of the criteria recommended for self evaluation could serve as a framework to guide the evaluation. The Key Work of School Boards criteria should also be included. It stands the test of being sanctioned by the official policy and governing body for all public school boards – the National School Boards Association (NSBA).

In order to look more closely into the topic of superintendent and board evaluation, the researchers decided to collect information from practicing superintendents.

METHODOLOGY

The design of the study called for survey methodology. The data for the study came from a selected sample of the school superintendents in Indiana, Illinois, and Texas. The names and addresses were obtained from official lists from state departments of education and/or superintendent organizations in the three states. Surveys were mailed to a random sample of 100 superintendents in Illinois and Texas. Since one of the researchers wanted to include members of his study council, surveys were sent to 100 superintendents

at random in Indiana and an additional 24 to members of that council. Superintendents were instructed to return the surveys via enclosed self-addressed stamped envelopes.

All data were entered into a computer-and processed anonymously and reported in aggregate form. This process allowed the researchers to report the data in such a way that individual participants were not identified. Participants had been assured of confidentiality in a letter that introduced the study and encouraged participation.

In Illinois, 47 of 100 surveys were returned by superintendents for a return rate of 47%; in Indiana, 78 of 124 responded for a rate of 63%; and, in Texas, 63 of 100 returned surveys for a rate of 63%. Some of the Texas data were incomplete. Consequently, some results will refer only to Indiana and Illinois, while other results cover all three states. The overall return rate for the three states was 58%. The data were subjected to frequency analyses and Pearson correlations using SPSS 10.0 for Windows at Teachers College, Ball State University.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Superintendent Evaluation

Superintendents are formally evaluated by their boards. In the three states studied, 83.5% of the responding superintendents said that they had a formal, written evaluation by their school boards (75.6% in Indiana, 83.0% in Illinois, and 93.7% in Texas). This evaluation does not seem to occur every year as only 77.5% stated that the evaluation was done annually (66.7% IN, 76.6% IL, 90.5% TX). In addition to the 83.5% who said that their boards evaluate them in writing, 13.0% of the superintendents in the three states said that their boards formally discussed their evaluations even though they were not put into writing (14.1% IN, 14.9% IL, 9.5% TX). It should be noted that Texas has a state law that requires that superintendents be evaluated by their boards, and 100% of the superintendents were aware of this law. The Texas researcher on this paper stated that the

law is often done with "religious zeal and an eye toward casting out any demons (and superintendents)."

Although state law may not require evaluation, a local board may have it required by board policy. In Indiana, 69.2% of the districts responding had board policies that required superintendent evaluation. In Illinois, 80.9% of the superintendents stated that their boards had a similar policy. As might be expected, superintendent evaluations are carried out in closed (executive) session as reported by 94.9% in Indiana, 100% in Illinois, and 100% in Texas.

To determine the type of evaluation used, if any, superintendents were asked if they completed any type of self-evaluation instrument or whether the evaluation was tied to district goals. Only Texas used the self-evaluation for a majority of its superintendents (74.6%). while only 28.2% in Indiana and 36.2% in Illinois used such an instrument as part of the evaluation process. District goals were used as a criteria for evaluation as reported by 78.6% of the superintendents in the three states (61.5% IN, 83.0% IL, 95.2% TX). When asked if their boards gave them goals to achieve each year as part of their evaluation process, 67.7% of the superintendents stated that they did, though the responses differed a great deal from state to state (44.9% IN, 59.6% IL, 100% TX).

Another question asked whether the superintendent's salary was based, at least partly, on the outcome of the evaluation. Only 60% stated that salary decisions resulted from the evaluation, with the responses varying in the three states (39.7% IN, 42.6% IN, 96.8% TX).

Finally, we asked whether the superintendents had input into their own evaluation process (such as suggesting goals for the next year) and whether they felt that the evaluations had been fair. In terms of the first question, 82.9% said that they had input into the process (75.6% IN, 95.7% IL, 81.0% TX), and most seemed to feel that they had been treated fairly in their boards' evaluation of them. For the present board of education, 73.7% felt that they had been treated fairly (76.9% IN, 83.0% IL, 60.3% TX), and when asked how they felt about their overall career evaluation, 77.4% said that they had been evaluated fairly by those boards (78.2% IN, 89.4% IL, 65.1% TX).

For Indiana and Illinois superintendents, six possible criteria were listed that could have been used in their evaluations. They were asked to rank them in importance. Below are the rankings for the two states:

	Indiana	Illinois
Management of the financial/business affairs of the district	1	3
Relations with the board and board members	2	2
Relations with the staff and community	3	4
Management of curriculum and instruction	4	5
Comprehensive planning for the district	5	1
Management of the school facilities	6	6

There are obvious differences between the responses in these two states. While all states are experiencing financial difficulties, perhaps Indiana's financial situation is worse than that in Illinois as Indiana has postponed a January state payment to all districts until December and has experienced severe delays in getting local property tax revenue to schools as a result of court-ordered reassessment of property according to new criteria. Relations with the board and board members ranked second in both states, and all superintendents would agree that their evaluations could very likely depend on these relationships, in spite of significant accomplishments in other areas. Finally, although the school facilities are an important investment for the community and often a source of pride, this category was the last one chosen by superintendents in both states as something that would be used in their evaluations.

Board Self-Evaluation

The superintendents in the three states were also asked about the evaluation of their boards by the boards themselves. Overall, only 13.8% stated that the board evaluated itself formally every year (14.1% IN, 19.1% IN, 9.5% TX), while 21.3% stated that the board did evaluate itself, but they did not do so annually (25.6% IN, 40.4% IL, 1.6% TX). Only 22.9% of the boards asked the superintendents to assist in this evaluation process (24.4% IN, 46.8% IN, 3.2% TX), and 18.6% used an outside person (university professor, school

boards association, etc.) to help them (19.2% IN, 42.6% IL, 0% TX). Texas law requires that boards evaluate themselves, but, in the words of the Texas researcher for this paper, boards just "wink at it and use no formal evaluation, resulting in self-evaluations that are haphazard at best and blatant at worse." The Texas State Comptroller's Office has become involved and is strongly urging boards to have formal evaluations.

Like the superintendent evaluation, the board's self-evaluation is done privately. Only 4.8% stated that the board discussed its evaluations publicly (1.3% IN, 17.0% IL, 0% TX). When the superintendents were asked if they felt that the board's self-evaluation was usually on target, 25.1% stated that it was, and 13.4% stated that it was not on target. Of course, the rest of the superintendents could not respond in either way since their boards did not evaluate themselves. The superintendents were asked if their boards used a formal written instrument to evaluate themselves. Keeping in mind that most districts do not have any evaluation, 21.9% use an instrument to evaluate themselves (24.4% IN, 38.3% IL, 6.3% TX), and 46.0% have a board policy requiring that they evaluate themselves (15.4% IN, 23.4% IL, 0% TX). Finally, the superintendents were asked if they or some board members have suggested that the board do a self-evaluation, but the board did not pursue any such action. The responding superintendents said that 23.0% of them (or the board members) had made this recommendation -- to no avail (32.1% IN, 14.9% IL, 17.5% TX).

DEMOGRAPHICS

For Indiana and Illinois, the student enrollment of the responding superintendents was as follows:

5.6%	under 300	12.8%	3,001-5,000
20.0%	301-1,000	7.2%	5,001-7,500
44.8%	1,001-3,000	8.8%	over 7,500

Counting this school year, the superintendents had a range of experience as a superintendent of 1-30 years, with a mean of 9.2 years and a median of 8 years.

The number of board members and the composition of the board were different in the three states:

In Indiana, 93.6% of board members were elected and 5.1% were appointed; Illinois had 97.9% elected and 2.1% appointed, and Texas had all of their members elected.

Indiana had 1.3% of its boards consisting of three board members, 60.3% with five board members, 1.3% with six members, and 35.9% with seven board members. Illinois had all of their boards consisting of seven board members. Males outnumbered females as board members, with Indiana having four male board members on 25.6% of its boards and five board members on an additional 23.1% of the boards (where the typical board has five members). Illinois had five males on 34.0% of its boards and four males on 19.1% of the boards (totaling seven members). On the other hand, Illinois had two females on 34.0% of the boards and three females on 21.3%.

In Indiana, 91.0% had no minority board members, with 5.1% of the boards having one minority member and 2.6% having two minority board members. Illinois had 93.6% with no minority members, and 6.4% of the boards had one minority member.

Finally, while most school districts across the country are K-12 districts with a board and superintendent, Illinois has three different types of school districts: elementary (K-8), high school (9-12), and unit districts (K-12). Each district type has its own superintendent and school board. In this study, 48.9% of the Illinois districts were K-8, 12.8% were high school districts, and 38.3% were K-12 districts. All of Indiana districts were K-12.

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